

JOHN C. HUNTINGTON

A GANDHĀRAN IMAGE OF AMITĀYUS' SUKHĀVATI

Estratto da
ANNALI
dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli
Volume 40 (N.S. XXX)

ISTITUTO ORIENTALE DI NAPOLI 1980

JOHN C. HUNTINGTON

A Gandhāran Image of Amitāyus' Sukhāvati

Although it has long been held that the bhakti form of Buddhism had been very important¹ and might even have had its origins in the Gandhāran-Bactrian regions², verification of its existence by identification of extant sculpture has been lacking. Further, a general lack of evidence regarding the existence of the cult in India has led scholars to believe that the Amitābha cults played little role in Indian Buddhism in spite of the fact that two of the three major texts are still known in Sanscrit. New evidence regarding the existence of the movement has recently come to light with the discovery of an image pedestal recording dedication of an Amitābha image in the year 26 of the Kuṣāṇa era³. Found at Mathura, it clearly demonstrates the presence of the cult in central India by some time in the second quarter of the second century of the Christian era. Given the very highly emphasized role of imagery in the cult as practiced in east Asia, and China⁴

¹ I would like to acknowledge several individuals who have most graciously contributed both their time and interest to the final version of this paper. My gratitude is extended to Max Loehr, who first encouraged me to publish these arguments, to Alexander C. Soper for his very useful and thoughtful criticisms of an early version, to Lewis R. Lancaster, Robert A. F. Thurman, Luis Gomez and Masatoshi Nagatomi for various contributions and discussions on the history of Buddhism and Buddhist texts, and especially to Maurizio Taddei whose encouragement, interest and help has been central to the whole study. I am also grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Council of Learned Societies for support of aspects of my research that touch on this particular study.

² This long held view about the origin may soon be in need of major revision. Current scholarship is beginning to see strong parallels in the development of the Kṛṣṇa cults of Mathura with the Buddhist bhakti movements. Given the apparently identical time frame of their respective developments, i.e. third through the first centuries of the pre-Christian era, there is a strong possibility that both movements are part of the same popular religious expression and that both originated in central India. Thus, while the Sukhāvati cult may not be free of Indo-Iranian influence, it may, much more strongly than suspected previously, reflect an Indian current of thinking. Masatoshi Nagatomi, oral communication, June 1979.

³ *Northern India Patrika*, October 18, 1977, p. 8: (Cf. Addenda)

⁴ Alexander C. Soper cites an image of Amitābha made in the fifth century in his *Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China*, Ascona, 1959, pp. 33-34.

in particular, and the fact that the tradition of images was formulated while the Gandhāran-Bactrian regions were still at the height of their Buddhist period, the newly discovered Indian evidence almost demands that there be something in the Gandhāran-Bactrian regions. The cross-cultural interface role that the region held makes it only logical that something that was found in both central India and China should also be found in one of the great trading and religious centers of the trans-Pamir kingdoms. It is the thesis of this study that the stele from Mohammed Nari, now in the Lahore Museum, is specifically a representation of the Sukhāvati paradise of Amī-tāyus (Figure 1), that it corresponds to the descriptions in the texts in considerable detail, and that it is probably an outgrowth of a long tradition of representations of paradise scenes in Gandhāran sculpture.

The original iconographic identification

Alfred Foucher originally identified the Mohammed Nari sculpture as well as others of the same generic type as the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī⁵. However, it is now widely recognized that the great French scholar made an erroneous judgement in respect to this particular type of image⁶. Actually, two versions of the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī did become popular in Buddhist literature and art. The earlier version tells of the Buddha performing a miracle in order to confound schismatics. In this case, he produces a full grown, fruit bearing mango tree virtually instantaneously from a stone of a mango that he had just consumed. Various versions of the Pāli and Tibetan canon differ slightly from the following but apparently, at one point in the Śrāvastī confrontation with the heretics, the Buddha rises into the air and produces rays of light, or alternately, rain from his shoulders and flame from his feet and then reverses the process several times. Upon the completion of this demonstration, the king of the heaven of the thirty-three gods, Śakra, causes a pavilion to appear. This pavilion is also described in a variety of ways, but is generally referred to as a gigantic and splendid edifice. It is noteworthy that the version in the *Jātakas*⁷ omits the details of the ascendance into the air and the emission of flames and rays. It is impossible to see how this narrative could have formed a basis for the Mohammed Nari stele. Further, an easily identifiable depiction of this particular version of the Śrāvastī miracle survives in Bactrian sculpture with examples from both Paitava and Khum Zargar. In the more complete of

⁵ Alfred Foucher, *Beginnings of Buddhist Art and Other Essays in Indian and Central Asian Archaeology*, London, 1917, pp. 147-184.

⁶ John M. Rosenfield, *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans*, Berkeley, 1967, p. 236

⁷ E. B. Cowell, ed., *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, London, 1957, vol. IV, no. 483.

the two Khum Zargar pieces (Figure 2) and in the Paitava version (Figure 3) the figure of the Buddha conforms to the standard "traditional image" convention, standing *en face*, displaying *abhayamudrā* with his right hand and holding the folds of his *saṅghātī* in his loosely closed left hand which hangs in a relaxed manner at his left side. Both figures are, or in the case of the Khum Zargar piece, were, nimbate with the Paitava figure having images of Indra and Brahmā bearing *chattras* above the head of the Buddha. More importantly, both images have flames or rays (probably in Sanscrit *prabhā*) emerging from the shoulders and rivulets of water descending from the lower body and feet. Thus, the two images, as well as a third, more fragmentary piece, also from Khum Zargar, conform exactly to the narrative of the story in this version. The Khum Zargar version was apparently bordered, at least in part, by other scenes from the narrative while the Paitava version displays the figure of the Buddha flanked by two small Buddhas seated and exhibiting *dhyānamudrā*, an apparent reference to the following version of the miracle which is the multiplication of Buddhas.

The second major version of the Śrāvastī miracle is found in the *Divyāvadāna*⁸. In it the Great Miracle occurs when the two *Nāgarājas*, Nanda and Upananda, raise a great lotus from the waters near the assembly, whereupon, the Buddha, attended by Indra and Brahmā, seats himself on the lotus and, by means of his supernatural abilities, causes other Buddhas also seated on lotuses to emerge from the same stalk. Although this is the specific episode and version referred to by Foucher in his original interpretation⁹, it is very difficult to imagine that the Mohammed Nari stele portrays this event. The text specifically states that the Buddha multiplied into other Buddhas, a feature not lost on other iconographic representations of this event, e.g. Ajanta, cave 2, but a specific depiction of this does not seem to occur in Gandhāra or Bactria. The Mohammed Nari stele has two additional groups of Buddhas in the upper right and left corners (Figures 5 and 6), and they are indeed groups shown with a Buddha in the center and emitting other Buddhas each on a lotus. But the very fact that there are two of them denies that this is *the* miracle of Śrāvastī. Secondly, the two groups are in important but not iconographically determinant positions on a stele that, given the usual narrative literalness of Gandhāran sculpture, is seemingly impossible to otherwise relate to the story. Moreover, in the Śrāvastī episode the multiplication was *the* miracle and one would expect it to have a much more prominent role in any depiction of the Śrāvastī confrontation than it has here. Further, it must be noted that other elements

⁸ Eugène Burnouf, *Introduction à l'histoire du bouddhisme indien*, Paris, 1876, pp. 152-172.

⁹ Foucher, *loc. cit.*

commonly used to specify the Śrāvastī events are also absent, e.g. the confounded heretics, the mango tree, etc. In fact it would seem that the only reason that the scenes like this were identified as the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī was the presence of the lotus pedestal on which the Buddha is seated, in this case flanked by two figures that Foucher mistook for two Nāgarājas (Figures 23 and 24). In addition it must be noted that at the time Foucher was writing it was in fashion to deny the existence of any of the Samboghakāya level deities at so early a date as the fourth century, the approximate date of the Mohammed Nari stele¹⁰.

The text tradition of the Sukhāvati literature

The main texts of the Sukhāvati literature have been known to western scholarship since the late 19th century and, indeed, have one of the fullest histories in Chinese translations of any of the *Sūtra* class of literature¹¹. The principal of the three texts, best known as the "*Larger Sukhāvati-vyūha*" (*LSV*), was translated ten times prior to the beginning of the sixth century according to one T'ang catalogue of the canon (Nanjio, No. 1487). The first version was rendered into Chinese by An Shih-kao, a Parthian from the Arsacid kingdom, who is known to have lived in Loyang from 148 to ca. 170 A.D. although his translation is no longer extant. The second translation was by the Kuṣāṇa Lokarakṣa (or Lokaṣema) who was active at least from 168–188 A.D. His version is still extant (Nanjio no. 25, and Taisho, XII, no. 361). A third early version was also by a Kuṣāṇa, Chih Ch'ien, also known as Chih Yueh. He was a pupil of Lokaṣema and was active during all of the first half of the third century. His version,

¹⁰ Indeed, modern Buddhological scholarship has done much to break down the earlier scholar's belief in the Hinayāna–Mahāyāna–Vajrayāna developmental sequence. Although a definitive analysis of the chronology has yet to be produced, many scholars place the development of Mahāyāna well into the pre-Christian era and see the fully developed basic texts as already broken into sub-families by the first century of the Christian era. Vajrayāna is also thought to have very early roots, both on the evidence of pre-Buddhist material and on the existence of fully developed Tantric meditations that are now recognized to be in the *Vaipulya sūtra* class of literature. It is clear that much remains to be done in the way of both text-critical and hermeneutical studies, yet it is already certain that the rational idealism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars which led them to espouse the "purity" and "earliness" of the Hinayāna Pali canon was a very serious hindrance to the validity of their views. One speaker at a recent conference summed up the "early" Pali canon as "the product of a sixth century A.D. editing by a limited and vested interest." It is now beginning to be believed that, although embellished in later periods, much of the Mahāyāna *sūtra* tradition contains within it the germ of very early teachings, thus completely reversing the pattern believed in by Foucher and his contemporaries.

¹¹ Bunyiu Nanjio, *A Catalogue of Chinese Translation of the Buddhist Tripitaka*, Oxford, 1883, reprint, Taiwan, 1975, pp. 10–11.

probably done after 229 is also extant (Nanjio, no. 26 or Taisho XII, no. 361)¹². A fourth translation was done by the Sogdian Saṃghavarman (K'ang Seng-k'ai) in 252 A.D. and has remained a very important version to the present day as it is the one used by Shinran Shonin in selecting his "standard canon of Shin Buddhism" in Japan¹³ (Nanjio, no. 27 or Taisho, XI, no. 360)¹⁴. Other, no longer extant, versions were translated by the Kuchean Po Yen in 257, the Kuṣāṇa Dharmarakṣa (Fa-hu, active 366–408), the Kashmiri Buddhahadra (active 398–421), an Indian (?) Ku Tā-li in 419, a disciple of Buddhahadra by the name of Pao-yun (active 424–453), and the Kashmiri Dharmamitra (active 424–441).

Although no details may be gleaned from lost translations, two facts are readily apparent from the foregoing list. First, the text must have been considered very important to have warranted so much attention from the translation teams and second, most of the translators were western Asians or Kashmiris, the latter, a region of obvious geographical proximity to western Asia. Accordingly, it seems entirely appropriate to expect that the *LSV* would have been important in the Bactrian–Gandhāran region. It is not my intention, however, to suggest a Gandhāran "origin" for the *LSV* even though this is a widely held view¹⁵. Further, Sanscrit versions, recovered from both Nepal¹⁶ and Japan¹⁷ demonstrate that the text was known in the traditional Indian regions.

A much shorter recension of the text, one held by some to be an earlier, less embellished form of the *LSV* and by others to be a summary or recapitulation of the *LSV*¹⁸, is also known in Sanscrit. It was translated

¹² E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, Leiden, 1972, p. 51, states with explanation that Chih Ch'ien was the first to translate the *Sukhāvatīvyūha*. One must assume that he is treating as apocryphal the attributions of the earlier translations. Even if this is the case, the arguments about the importance to the Kuṣāṇas would only be slightly lessened. Others, e.g. Soper in his *Early Literary Evidence* (p. 141), accept the Lokarakṣa (Lokaṣema) version as a valid extant version.

¹³ Ryokyo Fujimoto, *An Outline of the Triple Sutra of Shin Buddhism*, vol. I, "The Sutra on the Eternal Buddha", Kyoto, 1955, p. 40.

¹⁴ The foregoing is excerpted from Soper, *op. cit.*, p. 141; Zürcher, *op. cit.*, pp. 32–36, 48–55; and Nanjio, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–11.

¹⁵ Cf. note 2.

¹⁶ Brian H. Hodgson, *Essays on the Languages, Literature and Religion of Nepal and Tibet*, London, 1874, p. 37.

¹⁷ Max Müller, *Buddhist Mahāyāna Texts*, vol. II, f.p. Oxford, 1894, reprinted, Delhi, 1969, p. vii.

¹⁸ There are equally good arguments on both sides of this issue. However, it has recently been shown by Lewis R. Lancaster that Kumārājīva translated from a different "family" of texts than had been previously known. Following Lancaster's thesis, it may therefore be that neither text has particular primacy in age but that they simply reflect different families of texts and only demonstrate different "modes of communication"

into Chinese by Kumarajīva, the Kashmiri and Kashgari trained Kuchean translator. He was captured and taken to Kansu in 384 by Lu Kuang but it was not until 402 that anything is known of his translation activities¹⁹. The text is generally known as the “*Smaller Sukhāvati-vyūha*” (*SSV*) (Nanjio, no. 200, Taisho, XII, no. 366). The *SSV* is also known in Sanscrit versions from Japan²⁰ but, to my knowledge, has not yet been recovered in a Nepali version.

A third text, known only in its Chinese version, the *Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra* (*ADS*) (Nanjio, no. 198, Taisho, XII, no. 365), was translated by Kālayaśas (active 424–442) who is known only as a “Westerner”. Some scholars are of the opinion that the *sūtra* may have been “created” especially for the Chinese in that it contains a ranking system of rebirth exactly parallel to the Chinese rank system²¹. However, it seems to be more of a *śāstra* type of text rather than a *sūtra per se*, concentrating on the meditation of the visualization of Sukhāvati. Further, grades of rebirth in Sukhāvati are contained in the *LSV* as well, and, while not so fully elaborated, demonstrate clearly that the “ranking” system does not do violence to the original intention of the primary *sūtra*. Whatever the case of the origin of the *sūtra*, the descriptions it gives of the paradise closely parallel those of the other two texts and it will be of use in the following discussions²².

In fact, regardless of the date of translation of any of the texts cited above, it is clear that the ideas on which they were formulated were widely current and fully matured long before the Mohammed Nari stele was created. Thus, a comparison of the three to the imagery of the stele seems entirely appropriate.

The Mohammed Nari stele of Sukhāvati

The key problem to identifying paradise scenes in Buddhist art is that they are generally nearly isomorphic. Studies of them at Tun huang, and

through different teaching lineages of basically the same *sūtra*. Cfr. Lewis R. Lancaster, “The Editing of Buddhist Texts”, in *Buddhist Thought and Asian Civilization*, edited by Leslie Kawamura and Keith Scott, Emeryville (Calif.), 1977, pp. 145–151.

¹⁹ Zürcher, *op. cit.*, pp. 226–227.

²⁰ Müller, *op. cit.*, p. xii.

²¹ Masatoshi Nagatomi, oral communication, June 1979.

²² I have serious reservation about the whole concept of “forging” or “creating” *sūtras* for Chinese consumption. After all, the whole premise of the translation projects was to render the true teachings contained in Sanscrit into Chinese. While such devices as using the ranking system terminology for description of the ranks of rebirth may suggest to some the “creation” of a text, it very well may only be the use of convenient terminology for an arbitrary group of nine levels of rebirth, probably simply numbered in the presumed Sanscrit version.

at the Horyu-ji must rely on inscriptions for positive identification or internal elements of high specificity, e.g. the image of Amitābha in the crown of Avalokiteśvara. Further, it is now realized that the concept of the transcendent realms was formulated early in Buddhist cosmological speculation with such texts as the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* which describes the pure land of Akṣobhya, the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, and the *Gaṇḍhavyūha* at early Christian era dates or even before²³. The Akṣobhya paradise of Abhirati is displayed to the assembly of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra* by Vimalakīrti by reducing it to the size of the palm of his hand and showing it to the assembly²⁴. Yet in the same *sūtra* Amitābha appears only among a list of Buddhas who are visitors to the house of Vimalakīrti²⁵. This suggests that both Amitābha's and Akṣobhya's paradises were known at the time of the final formulation of the *Vimalakīrti* and that, at least for the movement in which the *Vimalakīrti* developed, Abhirati predominated within the context of the practice teachings. Akṣobhya also occurs in the *SSV* (p. 99)²⁶ as the first of the Buddhas of the eastern quarter who praise and support the teaching of the *SSV*²⁷. In addition to being the first of the eastern quarter Buddhas he is also the first Buddha mentioned, which suggests that he was of considerable importance at the time of the formulation of the passage and that his paradise may have pre-existed Sukhāvati or in some way been primary to it²⁸. It would seem clear from the foregoing that Abhirati either predated Sukhāvati or, at the latest, developed simultaneously with it. Thus, it will be necessary to be certain that the Mohammed Nari stele does not represent Abhirati.

Given the recent work on the *Gaṇḍhavyūha* portion of the *Avatamsaka*²⁹ which also places it into an early time frame, one must also be certain that any paradise assumed to be Sukhāvati is not the world of unequalled splendor shown to Sudhana by Maitreya when they enter the *kūṭāgara*

²³ On the *Gaṇḍhavyūha* and the *Vimalakīrti*, Masatoshi Nagatomi, oral communication, June 1979. On the *Gaṇḍhavyūha*, Luis Gomez, oral communication, January, 1979.

²⁴ Robert A. F. Thurman, tr., *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti*, University Park (Penn.) and London, 1976, pp. 93-94.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁶ For sake of convenient reference to the reader who might wish to parallel read this article and the citations, all page numbers to the three texts are placed in parenthesis in the main body of the article and all refer to *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. XLIX, *Buddhist Mahāyāna Texts*, pt. II. f.p. Oxford, 1894, reprinted, Delhi, 1969.

²⁷ Müller was unclear on the meaning of this passage (*SSV* p. 99n²). For a more precise reading cf. Hozen Seki, tr., *Buddha tells of the Infinite*, Tokyo, 1973, p. 61.

²⁸ It may well have to do with the formulation of the three family (*Vajra*, *Dharma*, and *Padma*) system but a discussion of this topic lies far outside the scope of this article.

²⁹ Cf. note 23.

or "Vairocana tower" in the next to the last visit. It is specifically this vision of the pure land of Vairocana that is the subject of a number of monuments in Asia and, while these are generally later than the stele in question, the concept of the paradise of Vairocana undoubtedly had much earlier beginnings.

Interestingly enough this is rather easily determined in the case of the Mohammed Nari stele. In the second group of figures from the top on the right hand edge of the stele a Buddha is depicted gesturing to the rest of the scene with his right hand and turning to his left to speak to a kneeling figure, who makes *añjali mudrā*. Behind the kneeling figure is an easily identified figure of Vajrapāṇi, the usual attendant to the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, while below the figure of the Buddha are two lions, apparently reclining in caves of the mountain on which the Buddha is seated (Figure 4). In the *LSV* "... the blessed Ānanda [says]... 'I wish, O Bhagavat, to see that Amitābha...'. At the moment of the request Amitābha lets ray of light out of his hand that illuminated the totality of the universe so that all may see the Tathāgata Amitābha. This takes place as a result of a dialogue between the historical Buddha and Ānanda (*LSV* pp. 59–60). However in the *Gaṇḍhavyūha* it is Maitreya who shows the interior of the *kūṭāgara* to Sudhana³⁰ and in the *Vimalakīrti* it is Vimalakīrti himself who displays Abhirati to the assembly at the command of the Buddha³¹. Thus, at each of the three major *vyūha* demonstrations in Māhayāna literature the progenitor is a different specific individual.

However there are other *vyūhas*, indeed countless *vyūhas*, for example in the *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka*, another text dealing with the paradisaical nature of Buddha lands and especially that of the Sahā world of Śākyamuni³². Most of the Buddha lands are only vaguely described as a kind of paradise of great perfection but without any specific details or individualizing characteristics³³. Yet, as a result of these considerations it is necessary to find other features commensurate with specifying features of the Sukhāvatī literature in order to make a positive identification. Yet the presence of the image of the historical Buddha specifically limits the scene to texts where the Buddha himself teaches the exhibition of the *vyūha*.

It should be noted in passing, that there is another very significant

³⁰ D. T. Suzuki, *On Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism*, edited by Edward Conze, New York, 1968, p. 155.

³¹ Thurman, *op. cit.*, pp. 93–95.

³² Nanjio, no 142, also known in Sanscrit. This text is an obvious response to the glories of Sukhāvatī as it takes much effort to explain why the Sahā world of Śākyamuni appears somewhat less than perfect. Thus, it is part of an ongoing dialogue formed out of the full development of the paradise tradition.

³³ Cf. chapters two and three of the *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka*.

feature to the image of the historical Buddha and that is the absence of a lotus support for either the Buddha or any member of the scene. Every other figure in the stele, except for the two flying *vidyādhara*s holding the wreath above the central Buddha's head is either directly or indirectly supported by a lotus blossom. The only interpretation one can give this is that the mundane nature of the figures of the historical Buddha, a *Nirmānakāya*, his attendant *Vajrapāṇi*, an ordinary mortal *deva*, and *Ānanda* is being sharply contrasted to the transcendent nature of the rest of the figures in the stele which are presumably *Samboghakāya* manifestations. The relationship of the beings of the pure land residing on lotuses to the texts will be taken up in the appropriate sequence.

There are two component groups of figures in the stele that would appear to have a very high level of specificity with regard to the *Sukhāvati* texts. These are the *maṇḍalas* of Buddhas in the upper right and left hand corners (Figures 5 and 6 respectively). The images are of Buddhas seated in *vajraparyāṅkāsa* and displaying *dhyānamudrā*. They are seated under *viśayachattras* and are each surrounded by figures of eight smaller Buddhas, carved at such an angle that they appear to be radiating out from the central figures of the two scenes. All figures are actually on lotus bases apparently intended to indicate their arising from a common stem, although the stalks of the lotuses have not been indicated in the sculpture. When found in isolated sculptures this type of image has been plausibly interpreted as the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī: however it seems obvious, for the reasons cited above, that this is not a correct interpretation in the context of this stele. D. B. Spooner, very astutely I believe, identified this type of image as *Amitābha* although he has not explained his reasoning in any significant detail.³⁴ One very strong argument against these scenes being Śrāvastī is the fact that the central Buddhas do not display *dharmacakramudrā*. The miracle was definitely a teaching event, a fact that has been specifically demonstrated by a virtually universal use of the *dharmacakramudrā* by the central Buddha of most all multiplication versions of the narrative³⁵; however the subsidiary Buddhas may be in any of a number of positions.

If these figures are interpreted as meditative reflections of *Amitābha* as the central image of the whole stele, then they may be considered to be an element of a very high degree of specificity to *Sukhāvati*. In a passage describing the lotus flowers of *Sukhāvati* the *LSV* states in the Buddha's words, "And from each gem-lotus there proceed thirty-six hundred thousand *kotis* of rays of light. And from each ray of light there proceed thirty-six hundred thousand *kotis* of Buddhas,..." (*LSV* p. 36). These lotus-born

³⁴ D. B. Spooner, "Excavations at Takht-i-Bahi", *ASIAR*, 1907-8, p. 143.

³⁵ This is not true of the radiance and rain versions, cf. above.

Buddhas go and teach the *Dharma* in every direction. The angle at which the smaller Buddhas flare away from the central figures of the two groups strongly suggests the usual representation of *prabhā* found throughout Buddhist art. Thus, I think that these two scenes are part of a highly specific interpretation of Sukhāvati as described in the *LSV* and, coupled with the depiction of Śākyamuni shown in the act of exhibiting the vision to Ānanda, are major determining identifying features of the stele as Sukhāvati.

A third feature of the stele that seems to be of equal importance to the preceding elements, is the fact that the donors, or if not the donors, representations of the laity, flanking the stalk of the central Buddha's lotus are themselves shown as standing on fully opened lotuses (Figures 7 and 8). Figures in secular garb on lotuses as opposed to either Buddhas or Bodhisattvas are exceedingly rare in the art of Gandhāra and Bactria except where there is the possibility of the interpretation of their having been reborn in Sukhāvati³⁶. In the *LSV* there are three levels of rebirth: 1) "beings, who have ascended to the palaces which extend over a hundred thousand Yojanas in the sky" (*LSV* p. 62); 2) "beings who, being born miraculously, appear sitting cross-legged in the lotus-flowers". (*LSV* p. 62); 3) "men dwelling within the calyx of excellent lotus-flowers" (*LSV* p. 62). The grades of rebirth are determined on levels of faith, with the lowest that of the person who entertains doubts. Only the qualities of the two lower forms of rebirth are examined in the *LSV* and from the attention paid to the third it is obvious that the whole point of the passage is a rather lengthy polemic against having doubt (*LSV* pp. 63–65). However both of the forms of rebirth emphasized in the text are specifically rebirth in or on a lotus. This, of course is the well known characteristic of Sukhāvati and since the text is directed towards lay devotionism it must be assumed that rebirth on a lotus was held to be appropriate for the laity. That the text states the beings would be reborn seated cross-legged and therefore one might expect that any representations of such reborn beings would depict them seated is not a problem in this context. The figures are shown in one of the two possible devotional postures when approaching a Buddha: to be seated would be unthinkable and would take precedence over the formulations of the text. Also, it is clear from the descriptions of the sizes of the lotuses in Sukhāvati, as large as ten *yojanas* in circumference

³⁶ I have had the benefit of examining the more than 3,000 photographs in the forthcoming *American Committee for South Asian Art Archive of Gandhāra Sculpture*, edited by Susan L. Huntington and Janice L. Dundon and except for the baby on a lotus motif (which may, in fact, represent the same concept) there are virtually no secular figures on lotuses out of a paradise context. Regarding the baby on a lotus motif, cf. Maurizio Taddei, "Harpocrates-Brahmā-Maitreya; a Tentative Interpretation of a Gandhāran Relief from Swāt". *Dialoghi di Archeologia*, vol. III, no. 3 (1969), pp. 364–390.

(*LSV* p. 36), being born cross-legged did not mean having to stay in that position – there was plenty of space to move around. The function of the lotus as the instrument of rebirth is again highly specific to the Sukhāvātī literature. Indeed, rebirth in Abhirati is not specifically invited in the *Vimalakīrti* let alone the lay person residing on a lotus³⁷, and in the *Gaṇḍhavyūha* access to Vairocana's tower is open only to the most spiritually advanced as evidenced by Sudhana having had to visit and learn the teachings of more than fifty Kalyanamitras before Maitreya lets him in the door of the *kūṭāgara*.

Yet another highly specific feature, especially of the vision of Sukhāvātī in the *LSV*, is the flocks of immortal birds that inhabit the realm (*LSV* pp. 33, 39, 61; *SSV* 97). Indeed this feature is emphasized strongly in the *LSV* which, while describing the delightful rivers of Sukhāvātī, says that the rivers are “full of delightful sounds of peacocks, sparrows, *kuṇālas*, cuckoos, *sārikas*, parrots, ducks, geese, herons, cranes, swans and others; with small islands inhabited by flocks of birds” (*LSV* pp. 38–9). Birds appearing to be parrots appear on the roofs of all four of the pavilions and *hamsas* (geese) are in the water directly below the base of the lotus stalk under the central figure (Figures 9–13). In the *SSV* the birds have the function of proclaiming the five *Indriya*, the five *bala*, and the seven *bodhyaṅga* (*SSV* pp. 95–96)³⁸ and thus have an extremely important Buddhological function in the context of the developing state of the residents of Sukhāvātī.

I think that on the basis of these four specific features, the stele can be assigned a very high degree of probability of being a representation of Sukhāvātī. It remains therefore to test the other elements of the stele against the texts for conformity or contradiction with the vows, descriptions and visions describing the nature of Sukhāvātī and its inhabitants.

The Buddha Amitābha is, in all three of the texts, described as being of gigantic stature. For example, in the *LSV* “[all beings of the Sahā world] saw at that time that Amitābha, the Tathāgata, holy and fully enlightened, like the Sumeru, the king of mountains, elevated above all

³⁷ Thurman, *op. cit.*, pp. 91–95.

³⁸ Müller's explanation of these according to Hardy is out of date. They are essentially the basis of future Buddhological advancement, i.e. the five *indriya* are the passive aspect of faith, vigour, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom (*śradda*, *vīrya*, *smṛti*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*) while the five *bala* are the active aspects of them. The seven *bodhyaṅga* are, mindfulness, investigation into *dharma*s, vigour, joyous zest, tranquillity, concentration and evenmindedness. All seventeen are part of the thirty-seven wings of enlightenment (*bodhipakṣa*) and suggest that a careful analysis of the *sūtra* would probably provide insight into how the Sukhāvātī texts are actually related to *Prajñāpāramitā* literature.

countries, surpassing all quarters", (*LSV* p. 60) or, in the *ADS* "the height of that Buddha is six hundred thousand *niyutas* of *koṭis* of *yojanas* innumerable as are the sands of the river Gangā" (*ADS* p. 180) or as in the thirteenth meditation of Vaidehī "the (real) body and its measurements are unlimited, incomprehensible to the ordinary mind" (*ADS* p. 187). This accounts for the apparent hierarchical scale of the Buddha in the stele, it is simply a reflection of the scale ascribed to him in the literature.

His lotus throne must also be of appropriate scale, and, while it is not dealt with directly in the *LSV* or the *SSV*, the meditations of Vaidehī have as the seventh meditation an elaborate visualization of the lotus throne. Further it contains a description of a tower built of gems which may refer to the stalk of the lotus which, in the stele, is represented as encrusted with small geometric patterns typical of the abstract representation of gems in Gandhāran sculpture (*ADS* pp. 176–177). Unfortunately, the exact location of the tower may not be discerned from either the original text or any of the various translations and commentaries on it available to me. However, since I know of no representation of a Sukhāvātī in east Asia in which there is a tower above the lotus, I have presumed that the tower refers to the stalk of the lotus.

Long passages in all three of the texts reiterate the infinite radiance of the Buddha. Even the name by which he is primarily known is literally "Light-without-end", indicating this aspect of the nature of the Buddha of Sukhāvātī. While it is somewhat speculative to interpret the actions of any minor figure in a sculpture, particularly when the figure is making an apparently spontaneous gesture, the obvious literalness of the Gandhāran school of sculpture leads me to think that the Bodhisattva seated to the immediate right of the female donor or patron (Figure 14) is responding to the intense light of the Buddha by the reflex action of shielding his eyes from the glare. His gesture is certainly neither a standard *mudrā* of any known variety nor does it seem to be any kind of gesture of deference or respect such as either *añjali* or *namaskāra*. Indeed, the very twist of his body and tilt of his head further reinforce the apparent spontaneity of his movement as a shielding action. Thus, there seems to be, quite possibly at the slightly bemused whim of a sculptor, a specific reference to the infinite light of the Buddha Amitābha in the person of the "Bodhisattva-of-the-light-shielding-gesture".

The majority of the stele is filled with representations of various Bodhisattvas, born in Sukhāvātī to listen to the *Dharma* and to reside there until such time as they have attained full enlightenment and either returned to the *Sahā* world as a result of their vows to aid other beings or attained *parinirvāṇa* (*LSV*, pp. 51–52). It should be noted that although the *LSV* also states that there will be *Srāvakas* in Sukhāvātī (e.g. *LSV*, p. 52) they

are so underplayed and outright denigrated (*LSV*, p. 70) that there is little reason to expect them to be represented in any depiction of what is clearly an “anti-Hinayāna” *sūtra* iconographic program. The different circumstances of the Bodhisattvas seem to reflect the two higher forms of rebirth described in the *LSV*, those in palaces and those on fully opened lotuses. In the Buddha’s description of the vision of Sukhāvati to Ajita he asks, “Do you see ... those beings, who have ascended to the palaces which extend over a hundred thousand Yojanas in the sky, ...?” (*LSV*, p. 62) and later Ajita states, “Again there are... beings who being born miraculously, appear sitting cross-legged in the lotus-flowers” (*LSV*, p. 62). The third form of rebirth, those beings born in the interior of the calyx of a lotus, is not represented on the stele as there are no closed lotus buds in the representation. Two individual and two groups of three Bodhisattvas are shown in pavilions in the upper half of the stele (Figures 9–12). The fact that the pavilions are described as being of great height strongly suggests the reason for their being placed in the upper portion of the stele. It is a widely used artistic convention in Gandhāran sculpture to show those elements of a composition as high or tall in the upper portion, even though, as may be easily seen from the non-overlapping of figures in this stele, the Bodhisattvas are meant to be seen as a great cluster around the figure of the Buddha rather than rising up against some imaginary elevation (this also conforms to the texts as there are no elevations whatever is Sukhāvati’s topography but this shall be discussed in turn). Again however, there are two very specific conventions of rebirth depicted in conformation with the *LSV*.

The overall impression of the arrangement of figures on the stele is that of a great multitude (Figure 1) which is also treated at length in two of the three texts (*LSV*, pp. 13–14, 31–32; *SSV*, p. 89). However, the actual number of Bodhisattvas, or, more accurately what I shall call “rebirth-sites”, individual lotuses supporting one or more Bodhisattvas, raises a very interesting problem. If one reads the two Bodhisattvas distributing garlands in the second upper left row as a single birth site because of both of them being supported by a single lotus and the two side pavilions, each with a large central figure and two smaller side figures, as two birth sites, again, because each pavilion is supported by a single lotus, then there are a total of twenty-five “birth-sites” on the stele. This exactly corresponds to the number of Bodhisattvas that accompany Amitābha in a number of east Asian manifestations.³⁹ While the textual source for this convention is unknown, and one must remember that it may have been only part

³⁹ Jōji Okazaki, *Pure Land Buddhist Painting*, tr. Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, Tokyo, New York and San Francisco, 1977, pp. 114–125 for both a discussion and examples.

of the oral tradition until relatively recently, the coincidence seems too great to be ignored. Indeed this is exactly the type of information that I believe is important to discover in the type of analysis that this article represents. If, using evidence surviving mostly in east Asia, we can identify a stele as being a Gandhāran representation of Sukhāvati and internal evidence in the stele itself conforms with poorly understood elements of east Asian representations, we have repaid our initial effort by identifying a possible "source" for the east Asian convention⁴⁰. It will only be when an Indra's net of these kinds of relationships is fully understood that we will have come to a point of real understanding in Buddhist iconographics.

A variety of identifications have been offered for the Bodhisattvas on the stele, especially by Lyons and Ingholt⁴¹. But, as suggested above, the Bodhisattvas are very probably a generalized representation of the multitudes reborn in Sukhāvati. This being the case, the Bodhisattvas would not represent the usual well known Bodhisattvas. However, it is entirely likely that the artists would have fallen back on well known conventional prototypes in order to portray the variety needed for the stele. Thus, while Lyons and Ingholt may identify the "reading" Bodhisattva (Figure 15) as Maitreya (Mañjuśrīkumār would have been a much better identification), it is likely that an established Bodhisattva form has simply been used to represent the generalized type. Other Bodhisattvas might be identified by the same process, hence, the two Bodhisattvas in the pavilions in the top register might also be identified as Maitreya(s), several figures holding lotuses, as Padmapāṇi-avalokiteśvara(s) and so on. The very fact that there are multiples of them would seem to negate that any one is the specific Bodhisattva. The whole issue is resolved, I feel, when it is remembered that the two Bodhisattvas in attendance on any Buddha are manifestations of that Buddha's *karuṇā* and *prajñā*. There are great varieties of ways of manifesting these representations, one of the commonest being the hair arrangements and ornaments of the individual figures, a crown manifesting *prajñā* and a *jaṭāmukuta* demonstrating *karuṇā*. On close examination it will be found that twelve of the Bodhisattvas wear crown or turbans and twelve wear their hair in one of several forms of *jaṭāmukuta* while one wears a double wreath⁴² (Figure 15).

⁴⁰ By use of the word "source" I do *not* mean to suggest that the Mohammed Nari stele was the actual prototype, only that the convention of the twenty-five Bodhisattvas was known in the Indo-Iranian regions before there is any evidence of them in east Asia and therefore the grouping had a non-Chinese origin.

⁴¹ Islay Lyons and Harald Ingholt, *Gandhāran Art in Pakistan*, New York, 1957, p. 121 ff.

⁴² Counting only the "birth-sites" with the pair distributing wreaths as one and only the principal figure in the two side pavilions.

Thus, It would seem that the “birth sites” are equally divided as to the manifestations of Amitābha’s *karuṇā* and *prajñā* with a single crowned figure falling outside either category. Again, this is another instance of far too great a coincidence. Indeed, the apsaras holding aloft the *chattra* (Figure 19) are also equally divided as are four of the six “*nāgas*” (Figures 22–25) with two of them, those closest to the lotus stalk (Figures 23 and 24) (who are clearly not *nāgas*)⁴³, wearing secular hair arrangements similar to the donor couple. Only the two *vidyādhara*s bearing the wreath above the head of the Buddha, seem to be wearing similar headdresses, and these may be iconographically determined. It may therefore be argued that the division of the subsidiary figures into either *karuṇā* or *prajñā* manifestations is virtually complete and following the interpretation of the “birth sites” precisely symmetrical. Accordingly, it follows that the specific identification of the various Bodhisattvas in the manner of Lyons and Ingholt is simply a misunderstanding of the intention of the iconographic program of the stele.

It is to the multitude of Bodhisattvas, themselves manifesting his own *prajñā* and *karuṇā*, that Amitābha eternally teaches the *Dharma* (*LSV*, p. 22), thus accounting for his displaying the Gandhāran variant of the *Dharmacakramudrā*, and the Bodhisattvas, in turn, recite and discuss the teachings whether learned from hearing the teachings or by omniscience. In the *LSV*, the Buddha tells Ānanda, “all those beings who have been born in that Buddha country recite the story of the Law, which is accompanied by omniscience” (*LSV*, p. 54), and, much later in the same passage, “[beings of Sukhāvātī are] wise, because in their search after the Law, [they are] never tired of discussions on the Law” (*LSV*, pp. 57–58). While again it is somewhat speculative to interpret the actions of figures in sculptures as manifesting particular attitudes, it still seems clear that several of the Bodhisattvas in the stele are clearly in the process of animated discussion, especially the two pairs of Bodhisattvas under each of the side pavilions (Figures 15 and 16). The two Bodhisattvas shown exhibiting *Dharmacakramudrā* and seated in the center niche of the two side pavilions are clearly formally reciting the *Dharma* to their two attendants (Figures 11 and 12). This is demonstrated, not only by the fact that the central figures make the *Dharmacakramudrā* but also by the fact that the attendants each make *añjalimudrā* towards the central figures. This theme is reiterated toward the central figure of Amitābha by the left Bodhisattva immediately outside of the *paṭa*-bearing Bodhisattva to the Buddha’s right and by the lay donors or patrons.

All of the Bodhisattvas on the stele exhibit a relaxed and easy posture seemingly indicative of the paradisaal life described in the texts (*LSV*, pas-

⁴³ Cf. *infra*.

sim), literally, “Filled with pleasure, far beyond the gods and men” (*LSV*, p. 19). In the section on the vows of Dharmākara of just how easy the life will be (*LSV*, pp. 12–22), each being will become a veritable *rājikumār* with unlimited material goods, clothing that needs not be dyed or sewn, and endless varieties of pleasurable gems, perfumes and the like.

The group of Bodhisattvas accompanying Amitābha, generalized as they may seem, very probably had a specific meaning. In east Asia it is speculated that they may have represented the twenty-five *samādhis* or some other meditation related to the Amitābha practices⁴⁴. The Bodhisattvas on the stele do seem to suggest this as well. Each one is particularly individualized, some by slightly different versions of the *jaṭāmukuṭa*, others by specific actions, one pair on a single lotus, and so on. It is not possible to even speculate at this time just what the meaning might be, but, given the extremely common existence of such relationships in Buddhist iconography I feel that it is something that future researchers should be alert to.

Of all the numberless Bodhisattvas residing in Sukhāvātī only two are given any identity and these only in two of the three texts. Both the *LSV* and the *ADS* specifically name Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta as the main Bodhisattva reflexes of Amitābha. Their very omission in the *SSV* has given rise to arguments that the *SSV* is earlier than the other two texts⁴⁵. In the *LSV*, reference to the two Bodhisattvas is limited to a single very short passage in which the Buddha answers a question by Ānanda as to who the two Bodhisattvas are, “One of them... is the noble-minded Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, and the second is Mahāsthāmaprāpta by name (*LSV*, p. 52) and mentions Avalokiteśvara in passing only in one other passage (*LSV*, p. 48). There is no mention of any identifying characteristics to the two Bodhisattvas and nothing is made of their efforts to aid people to reach Sukhāvātī. All such references are contained in the presumably later *ADS* wherein lengthy descriptions are given (*ADS*, pp. 178–9, 181–186). While I do not wish to take a position on the “creation” of a *sūtra*, it does seem clear that the emphasis on the two Bodhisattvas found in the *ADS* is not present in the Mohammed Nari stele. However, so many other factors from all the texts have coincided with the sculpture, I must conclude that the Mohammed Nari stele does not belong to a tradition of Sukhāvātī in which the two Bodhisattvas were emphasized.

I do not mean to suggest, however, that the two are not present on the stele although I admit at the outset of this discussion I cannot prove which two Bodhisattvas they are. I think, there is a strong case for either of two pairs, those in the side pavilions (Figures 11 and 12), who are shown front-

⁴⁴ Okazaki, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

⁴⁵ Soper, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

ally in a teaching gesture and who have been accorded attendants of their own, or a second pair, those in the outer left and right lower corners (Figures 17 and 18). These latter are closest to the viewer and therefore most able to reach him in order to aid him to salvation. These appear to have a single, smaller attendant adjacent to them on the stele and turning towards them thus emphasizing their importance. In addition, the Bodhisattva on the lower right carries a lotus in an upright position as Avalokiteśvara so frequently does (Figure 18). Unfortunately, the counterpart figure on the lower left is much too damaged to tell much about it except that he wears a turban in contrast to the *jaṭāmukuṭa* of the Avalokiteśvara figure. A third pair must also be considered, because they are second in scale to the central Buddha, the two figures bearing aloft the *paṭa* banners. However, it is this very act of bearing the banners that, to my thinking, eliminates them from being a possibility. In all the examples of east Asian Sukhāvātī representations that I have been able to see, the two Bodhisattvas are never involved with any action other than preaching the Dharma or simply holding their respective symbols. Thus, although their scale suggests importance I am strongly disinclined to view these two as the major pair of Bodhisattvas ⁴⁶.

Between the other two pairs, there seems to be no objective method of choosing at this time. Many versions of Sukhāvātī represent the two Bodhisattvas seated on their own pavilions, preaching to, or surrounded by their own disciples, which would serve to suggest the two figures in the side pavilions. However, in a considerable number of Gandhāran stelae the promise of future interaction with the worshipper takes place in the lower portion of the relief. Thus, left to a semi-subjective response, I must suggest that the presence of the lotus and the fact that the promise of future interaction in Gandhāran relief sculpture is frequently in the lower areas of a composition, indicate that the two lower outside Bodhisattvas (so regrettably cut by early owners of the stele to accommodate mounting brackets) seem to have the highest probability of being Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta.

The flowers above the *chattra* held over the head of the Buddha are part of the constant rain of jeweled flowers found in texts in several places (e.g. *LSV*, pp. 19, 43–44; *SSV*, p. 95, etc.). However, the whole upper central portion of the stele's composition (Figure 19) seems to conform in detail to a passage in the *LSV* in which, speaking to Ānanda of the glories of Sukhāvātī, the Buddha relates, "And in the sky, the heavenly flowers of all colours, and heavenly canopies are held, likewise heavenly excellent

⁴⁶ I freely admit ambivalence on this point; in an early version of this article I was strongly inclined to believe that these were the two Bodhisattvas.

umbrellas and all kinds of ornaments, and heavenly *apsaras* dance" (*LSV*, p. 44). In this case, the specified holding of the *chattra*, which could only be accomplished by *apsaras* and who, by the nature of the land into which they have born must be male (*LSV*, p. 19), would seem to be another instance of a highly specific characteristic of the text portrayed in the stele.

Two elements of the central Buddha group, the wreath held over the head of the Buddha by the two winged *vidyādhara*s (Figure 19) and the sculpted representations of *paṭa* banner paintings held aloft by the Bodhisattvas flanking the Buddha (Figures 20 and 21), have no known correlation to the texts. However, they are not found in any other known text on paradises either and thus are specific to none.

The function of the wreath in Buddhism has not been studied in any significant detail and to understand its place, both in the context of this sculpture and in Gandhāran art in general, it is necessary to make a brief aside. Properly known as *kusumamālā*, usually translated as "flower garland," they are actually wreaths meant to be placed on the heads of the successful aspirants to mystical attainment and have been a common feature of the iconography of Buddhist art and architecture since the earliest times. There are sculpted representations of wreaths in the earliest *caitya* halls, e.g. in the second century B.C. at Bedsa, and they continue to be represented throughout the history of the western caves up to the latest work at Ellora, there usually carried in the hands of *vidyādhara*s. That they are intended to be worn on the head may be determined from two sources. In east Asia the characters used to translate the term *kusumamālā*, read "hua-man" in Chinese and "keman" in Japanese, mean literally, "flowered headress" or "flowered hair arrangement", demonstrating beyond a doubt that wreath and not garland was the original intention of the Sanscrit. In eastern India, Nepal and Tibet, the crowns worn by both Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are made up of a number of elements, the lowest of which is often a flowered wreath. Further, in Tibet, there is an iconography of the Buddha in which the sub-components of the crown are built up in successive layers starting from a flower wreath or fillet adorned with flowers.

It would seem that the wreath represents either a Gandhāran version of the Buddhist crown or possibly, a prototypical crown. It must be remembered, however, that crowned images of the Buddha are known in various parts of India from the fifth century on and that there are several, significantly different varieties of the crown. This fact suggests to me the existence of parallel iconographic traditions and that the wreath is simply the Gandhāran version. However, because the stele dates from approximately a century prior to any known Indian representation, there may be those "linear constructionists" who will see the wreath as the forerunner of the crown.

That a crowned Buddha is intended is significant for, although there is no textual source for it that I have found⁴⁷, Amitāyus is more commonly crowned in east Asian representations while Amitābha is usually without a crown. The date of this conventional distinction between the two nominative forms of Amitābha is unknown. However, on the basis of this distinction it is possible to suggest that the Buddha of the Mohammed Nari stele is specifically intended to be Amitāyus.

The sculpted representations of banner paintings (Figures 20 and 21) are, to my knowledge, completely unique in Gandhāran art. “Banners” (Sk. *dhvaja*) indicating a streamer-like cloth hanging from a triangular mounting, are indicated several times in the texts as appropriate to use in worship of the Buddha (*LSV* p. 53). Some of these are known from Sir Aurel Stein’s Tun-huang finds and they are generally figured with either Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. However, they do not resemble except in a broad generic sense the sculpted images of *paṭas* in the stele. These are clearly the earliest surviving representations of what is best known to the world today as the *thangka* or Tibetan type of Buddhist *paṭa*. Interestingly enough, the Tibetan *thangka* is carried in a virtually identical manner to the present day in processions of important religious officials, high ranking monks and the various incarnations.

The images on the *paṭas* are of two Bodhisattvas, one wearing a turban and the other with his hair in a *jaṭāmukuta*. There are no identifying elements to them as both are represented in simple robes and have their hands in *dhyānamudrā*. However, I think that it is most likely that these are further representations of the *karuṇā* and *prajñā* aspects of Amitāyus, Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta.

Considerable attention is given in the texts to the “land” of Sukhāvati but throughout, the real emphasis is on water. After long passages describing

⁴⁷ Minoru Kiyota, in his translation of the *Sukhāvativyūhōpadeśa* which is usually attributed to Vasubandhu and which was translated into Chinese in about 529 by Bodhiruci, reads the first of the eight merits of the Buddha as “The King [adorned with] immeasurable jewels [sits on] the marvelous pure-lotus-platform”. There are clearly two possible readings of the Chinese, Kiyota’s and “The King, Immeasurable-Jewel, ...”. It would be of great interest to know how Kiyota decided to make the addition (I am not at all calling it into question) because if it is made according to some traditional teaching or by means of yet another commentary it would place the adornment of the Buddha into a traditional context of no later than the fifth century and, if the Vasubandhu attribution is correct, well into the fourth. On the other hand, if the reading is simply Kiyota’s own interpretation based on the hindsight that many forms of Amitāyus are crowned then we are still left without an early text reference for the crowning of Amitāyus–Amitābha. Cf. Minoru Kiyota, “Buddhist Devotional Meditation: A Study of the Sukhāvativyūhōpadeśa”, in *Mahāyāna Buddhist Meditation*, edited by Minoru Kiyota, Honolulu, 1978, pp. 249–296 and especially p. 276.

the lakes and streams and the banks of the huge rivers (e.g. *LSV*, pp. 37–38) and how the land is without mountains but “level on every side” (*LSV*, pp. 36–37), the *LSV* then states, “And as this great earth might be, when all covered with water, so that no trees, no mountains, no islands, no grasses, bushes, herbs, large trees, no rivers, chasms, water-falls, would be seen, but only the one great earth which had all become an ocean, in exactly the same manner there is neither mark nor sign whatever to be seen in that Buddha country [except the inhabitants]” (*LSV*, p. 60–61). One might say that the effect is mildly contradictory. Again, in the very next paragraph gardens, parks, rivers and lakes are again described (*LSV*, p. 61). The watery “land” of Sukhāvati is again emphasized in the second meditation of Vaidehī wherein, as a meditation object to aid in the visualization of the land, Vaidehī is told by the Buddha to “gaze on the water clear and pure...” (*ADS*, p. 170). Following that there is a description of the land, in the fourth meditation a description of the trees, in the fifth meditation, the lakes and streams of the land. Thus, in true Mahāyāna fashion the features of the land are featureless.

The Mohammed Nari stele shows only the water of Sukhāvati (Figures 22–25) but I think for a much more prosaic reason than the above discussion might suggest – lotuses grow in water and the muddy waters beneath them are the basis of their transcendence. However, the use of the water representation for the land of Sukhāvati is not at all out of keeping with the texts and, indeed could be an easily derived interpretation from them. In either case the use of water is entirely appropriate to the texts.

There are four representations of *nāgas* emerging from lotuses in the water (Figures 22–25) and at the base of the lotus stalk. While it is specifically stated that the only two levels of rebirth available in Sukhāvati are those of gods and men (*LSV*, p. 33), it is also stated that, “This splendor of the ... [Buddha Amitābha/Amitāyus] is pure, great, ... producing happiness, delight, and joy for men, not-men, *kinnaras*, ... *Nāgas*, *Asuras* and *Devas* (*LSV*, p. 30). Therefore even though their specific form of rebirth is denied, there is an understood mechanism by which they will be able to see the full glory of Amitābha/Amitāyus. Accordingly, since among the spirit world, the *nāgas* have had a pre-eminent role in Buddhism, it is not out of keeping that they are included on the stele⁴⁸. It is interesting to note in passing that the two figures on either side of the lotus stalk are

⁴⁸ Some of my current research is pointing in the direction of extreme importance for the *nāgas* in the context of popular aspects of Buddhism. It may well have been that the donors would not have thought of excluding them. It is even possible that their propitiation was the actual purpose of dedicating this stele – but this is another lengthy study.

apparently a secularly-garbed couple each flanked by their *nāga* supporter or patron⁴⁹ (Figures 23 and 24). The female has neither a *nāga* hood like the four *nāgas* nor does she hold a snake. Her hands (now missing) were in *añjalimudrā* as can be seen from the breaks in the stone. The snake wrapped around the shoulders of the bearded male suggests that he may be some sort of “*nāga*-priest” as it is clearly not a *nāga* hood as seen on the other four representations of *nāgas*. An explanation of this group is far outside the scope of this paper and would seem to require an extensive study of lay devotional practices in the Gandhāran-Bactrian regions.

The donor or patron couple (Figures 7 and 8) are typical of many similar figures in Gandhāran and Bactrian art. Further the presence of the patron, donor or individual who is to receive the benefit of the vision of the death-bed visitation of Amitābha (*LSV*, pp. 45–6) is particularly common in east Asian representations of Sukhāvati. The presence of a woman born into Sukhāvati does create a minor paradox for one of Dharmākara’s vows specifically states that just by hearing his name women will be forever freed from rebirth as a female (*LSV*, p. 19). The solution lies in the fact that the donors have not in fact yet been born in paradise but are simply visualizing themselves there. In his instructions to Vaidehī on the twelfth meditation the Buddha tells her, “After you have had this perception, you should imagine yourself to be born in the World of Highest Happiness in the western quarter, and to be seated cross-legged on a lotus-flower there. Then imagine that the flower has shut you in and afterwards unfolded; [so that you may see for yourself the beings and glories of Sukhāvati]” (*ADS*, p. 186)⁵⁰. While the *ADS* is possibly a “later” text or one of another tradition which emphasized the two Bodhisattvas, it still demonstrates in principle how the donatrix is visually present in Sukhāvati – the sculpture itself is literally the manifestation of the visualizations of the donors and naturally includes them in the primary place of homage to the Buddha Amitāyus, directly at his feet. The fact that they are placed to the sides of the stalk rather than directly in front of the Buddha is simply an artistic convention which allows an unobstructed view of the Buddha as well as a more recognizable profile of the donor rather than the back view which would be dictated by placing them in the strictly “correct” position.

In short, virtually every detail of the stele corresponds to text references in the Sukhāvati literature and, as is obvious from the references themselves, the *LSV* in particular seems to contain a complete correspondence to the

⁴⁹ It is hard to conceive just how early scholars could have interpreted this full figured female as a *Nāgarāja*.

⁵⁰ I have taken the liberty of changing the verbs and pronouns to modern usage.

stele. It is therefore possible to suggest that it is in fact the *LSV* that was the source of the iconographic program as seen in the Mohammed Nari stele of the Sukhāvati of Amitābha/Amitāyus Buddha.

That such representations should be identifiable in Gandhāra is not in the least suprising. Given the obvious relationship of the first several translators to the western regions of Asia one would have to say that it is more suprising that such iconography has not been recognized previously. In this context a final point remains. The tradition of images of both Amitābha/Amitāyus in east Asia is more predominantly one of paintings and of sculpted wood which strongly suggests that the same may have been true for the Gandhāran and Bactrian regions as well. If such is the case, then images such as the Mohammed Nari stele are possibly the product of a very long tradition of development and therefore it may prove fruitful to re-examine much of the body of known Gandhāran sculpture for evidence of the tradition. It should be noted in this relation to this suggestion that the Amitābha image pedestal from Mathurā contains the feet of a Buddha that apparently would have been of the so-called "Bala" type that might well have been indistinguishable from others of the type except for the inscription. Thus, it may be that many of the Gandhāran Buddhas seated on lotuses and displaying *dharmacakramudrā* should be identified as Amitābha but only further research will determine this.

ADDENDA

Since this article went to press, the author has participated in the "Mathura Conference" sponsored by the American Institute for Indian Studies at which Dr. R. C. Sharma, Director of the Mathura Museum was also present. It was Dr. Sharma who originally read the inscription on the Amitābha pedestal (cf. footnote 3) and issued the press release in which the announcement of the image was made. Originally the date was read as year 28 but in consultation with Dr. B.N. Mukherjee, Dr. Sharma has since amended his reading to the year 26. The full text of the inscription will appear in the final publication of the conference papers which will be published by the American Institute for Indian Studies probably in 1981 or 1982. I would also like to express my gratitude to Prof. Joanna G. Williams for putting me in contact with Dr. Sharma and providing me with both transcriptions and photographs of the inscription.



Fig. 1 – Mohammed Nari stele, Lahore Museum.



Fig. 2 - Khum Zargar, Miracle of Śrāvastī,
Kabul Museum.



Fig. 3 - Paitava, Miracle of Śrāvastī,
Musée Guimet.



Fig. 4 - Mohammed Nari stele, Buddha exhibiting the *vyūha* to Ānanda.



Fig. 5 – Mohammed Nari stele, left Buddha lotus.



Fig. 6 – Mohammed Nari stele, right Buddha lotus.



Fig. 8 – Mohammed Nari stele, female donatrix or patroness.



Fig. 7 – Mohammed Nari stele, male donor or patron.



Fig. 10 – Mohammed Nari stele, top right pavilion.



Fig. 9 – Mohammed Nari stele, top left pavilion.



Fig. 12 - Mohammed Nari stele, right center pavilion.



Fig. 11 - Mohammed Nari stele, left center pavilion.



Fig. 13 - Mohammed Nari stele, *hamsa* in water.



Fig. 14 - Mohammed Nari stele, Bodhisattva-of-the-light-shielding-gesture.



Fig. 15 - Mohammed Nari stele, "reading" Bodhisattva and "wreath-wearing" Bodhisattva.



Fig. 16 – Mohammed Nari stele, pair of Bodhisattvas discussing the *Dharma*.



Fig. 17 – Mohammed Nari stele, lower left band of figures.



Fig. 18 – Mohammed Nari stele, lower right band of figures.



Fig. 19 - Mohammed Nari stele, flowers, *chattrā* and wreath above the head of the Buddha.



Fig. 21 - Mohammed Nari stele,
right banner-carrying Bodhisattva.



Fig. 20 - Mohammed Nari stele,
left banner-carrying Bodhisattva.



Fig. 22 – Mohammed Nari stele, left section of the water.



Fig. 23 – Mohammed Nari stele, left center section of the water.



Fig. 24 - Mohammed Nari stele, right center section of the water.



Fig. 25 - Mohammed Nari stele, right section of the water.